WORLD CHRONICLE

UNITED NATIONS

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

DURATION: 28'00" TRANSCRIPT AS BROADCAST

PROGRAMME: **"WORLD CHRONICLE"**

GUEST: Giandomenico Picco, United Nations Assistant Secretary-General

JOURNALISTS: Paul Lewis, The New York Times

Bhaskar Menon, PTI-TV, India

Khalil Matar, Assharq Al-Awsat

MODERATOR: Michael Littlejohns

SYNOPSIS

HOSTAGES

Giandomenico Picco, United Nations Assistant Secretary-General discusses the United Nations' recent efforts in successfully resolving many of the situations involving hostages and detainees held by various groups in the Middle East. Mr. Picco pays tribute to the governments of Iran, Syria, Lebanon and Israel for their co-operation during the long process. The United Nations, Mr. Picco says, is committed to the release of the remaining hostages and detainees.

"WORLD CHRONICLE" is produced by the Information Products Division, Department of Public Information, United Nations, New York, NY 10017, USA.

Executive Producer: Kamil Taha
Director: Livingston Hinckley
Production Assistant: Judith Bennett Henry

Programme No. 454 Recorded on 13 December 1991

VOICE: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **WORLD CHRONICLE**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **WORLD CHRONICLE.**

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns and this is **WORLD CHRONICLE.**

In recent years, politics in the Middle East have been experiencing a new and cruel phenomenon -- the practice of hostage-taking. This activity, illegal under international law, has involved not only governments, but often shadowy groups with varying motives. Now however, international diplomacy has succeeded in resolving many of the situations involving hostages and detainees.

Our guest today is a man who understands as well as anyone how difficult and dangerous the task has been in the process of freeing the hostages. He is Giandomenico Picco, United Nations Assistant Secretary-General. Mr. Picco was directly involved in the recent negotiations which successfully resulted in the release of many hostages.

A national of Italy, Mr. Picco will be interviewed here at United Nations headquarters in New York by: Paul Lewis of The New York Times; Bhaskar Menon of PTI-TV of India and; Khalil Matar of Assharq Al-Awsat.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Picco, you ought to be congratulated on a magnificent performance. The Secretary-General has said that he considers you more of a soldier than a diplomat. We've read reports that you went unarmed into, what-shall-I-say, the "terrorists' lairs", sometimes blindfolded, sometimes hooded. Did you ever feel that your life was at risk?

READEX
FICHE

PICCO: Well, the circumstances under which this operation was conducted were indeed very unorthodox. But I have to say the interlocutors I spoke to throughout this operation did their best to assure me, to reassure me and to make it easier for me, what in practical terms was a difficult, logistic operation. Of course, you think about many things when you are going around Lebanon in the middle of the night alone but I think it was also proof that, as an international civil servant, I was doing the right thing. I had nothing to fear and I believe this was understood and the fact that I'm here today, proves that my interlocutors agreed with me.

LITTLEJOHNS: Terry Waite, if not an international civil servant, was a servant of the Anglican church, yet they picked him up and held him for quite a long time -- a very long time, in fact. Did you ever feel that there was a risk that you might become a hostage yourself?

PICCO: What Mr. Perez de Cuellar and I did before I ever went into Beirut was to do a lot of homework and the homework was of a political and logistic nature. I think the homework paid off and I think that it has to be understood that my visits to Beirut were not my first step into this episode but rather the last step, for much had been done earlier.

LITTLEJOHNS: When you say homework, could you elaborate a little on that?

PICCO: Well, I think we prepared the political ground for these negotiations to be successful and we also spoke to all those governments who could help us and it was not just talking to them, it was really preparing the steps which would have led to what in fact happened in my negotiations with the kidnappers.

LEWIS: I wonder if I could ask you first to sketch in a little bit of the geo-political background to this operation. Why was it at this moment in time, after so many years that, following the end of the Gulf war, it seems that the Iranian leadership suddenly decided that it was now in its interest to resolve the hostage problem in Beirut and they began to use their influence on these groups to get them freed? Now why did all this happen now and not two years ago?

PICCO: I think that question of course should be asked of the Iranian leadership for it is indeed true that the Iranian government was extremely co-operative with the Secretary-General and helped our negotiations all the way. Why now? Well, I think that from where I stand, what was of some importance is that a window was being opened and we tried to push it a bit further so that the window would open totally and I think we succeeded in doing that. I suppose that the best answer I can give you is that we have found, in the Middle East, a great interest by the governments we dealt with to enter a time, an era of more working together.

MENON: What remains to be done? How many more hostages are there and what are you trying to do about them?

PICCO: As we speak, we can say we have concluded one particular chapter which Mr. Perez de Cuellar referred to as the "British-American chapter", but much remains and indeed, there is a German chapter, there is an Israeli chapter, there is a Lebanese chapter to be resolved. And what are we doing? We are working every single day on this and we hope that this would bring some results.

MENON: Is the pressure off because the British-American chapter is over?

PICCO: I don't think so.

MATAR: To what extent was the connection of this whole issue of the American-British chapter with the Israeli chapter and, so far for today, are you committed to helping the Israelis or to pressuring the Israelis to release more of their Lebanese detainees because the British-American chapter is closed?

PICCO: All of the situations of detention without due process of law should be resolved on their own merits for the situation in which these people find themselves, is an unjust situation. We are committed to do our best so that the situation can be resolved. What you are asking me is in fact a matter which at times might have been an issue connected to another but it was a matter of tactics. Sometimes the issues were more closely linked, sometimes they were less closely linked. It varied throughout the history of the negotiations.

MATAR: And now, do you feel that there is pressure on you to continue that process just because you were successful with the British-American chapter?

PICCO: I feel a tremendous moral pressure to continue my work.

LITTLEJOHNS: The Secretary-General, Mr. Perez de Cuellar, steps down at the end of the year and will be succeeded by Mr. Boutros Boutros-Ghali of Egypt. Do you anticipate that Mr. Boutros-Ghali will pick up the threads of the effort to release the remaining hostages or will the current Secretary-General, who has made the

point that he is personally trusted by the parties, continue his efforts and also, that you will continue with him?

PICCO: Many questions in your single question -- the first one is that, in my view, we still have some time to go before the end of the tenure of Mr. Perez de Cuellar. It may seem a short time but I think we still have some time. The second answer I'd like to give you is that, we will cross the bridge of what we do under Mr. Boutros-Ghali when the situation occurs and the third is that in fact, it's still possible to have some movement forward on this question of detention without due process of law in the next few weeks.

LEWIS: I am wondering if it's fair to say that there is really a kind of a package deal here. There was something for everybody in the story to gain. The Iranians, by working for the release of the hostages, would improve their position internationally. Iran also learnt about some people of its own who disappeared in Lebanon. The other western countries got back their hostages and Israel learnt about the fate of some of its missing soldiers and some of the Lebanese were released by Israel. Is that the way it was? A kind of a package deal with something for everybody?

PICCO: I think the diplomacy of the United Nations in fact has always moved in the direction that is different from a government diplomacy. We don't try to score political points in favour of one or another but we would like to develop a situation where at the end, everybody wins and if indeed everybody wins, then we have all won. And I think that is why we should continue what we've done until now so that at the end, everybody feels they've really won and now it may happen that somebody feels that they've only won partially. So yes, it is correct that we would like

everybody at the end to say it was worthwhile doing it but from here, to say that it was a total package, I think that is incorrect.

LITTLEJOHNS: But are the captors really entitled to win anything? After all, they were committing a grave offence against international law. Surely they should be punished!

PICCO: The captors won with the release of the hostages. I said this to them personally and I said this in public. I think the moment they released the hostages, they won. They won because they performed a correct act -- the decision to release the hostages. That is their greatest victory, in my opinion. It is important to look at the different developments, the different issues on their own merits. I think until now we can say 91 prisoners left Alahiyam or Israeli prisons -- prisoners who were there without due process of law. I think Israel won and I think the people who were released, won. So individually, in their own right, I think there is a lot for everybody.

MENON: A follow-up to my previous question -- is there a figure of how many hostages are still left? And if not, why not? The other question is one of political perception. Is it your perception that the whole process that has happened was possible because the American-British presence in the Arab world has changed substantially; that the politics in the area have changed?

PICCO: With regard to the numbers, we are now working on the case of the Germans; we're working on the case of an Italian; we're working on the case of the Alahiyam prisoners; we're working on the Israelis missing or those who are not missing but whose bodies have still been detained and the Secretary-General has been approached by a number of governments. I can recall here the

government of Iran who has a number of its nationals who were kidnapped and disappeared during the years in Israel and I can tell you, other governments have approached us, other individuals have approached us with reference to people who have disappeared in Lebanon. We will do what we can on all these fronts. As for your second question, I believe that the governments who have helped us mostly in this operation are the governments of Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Israel.

LITTLEJOHNS: The programme is **WORLD CHRONICLE.** Our guest is Giandomenico Picco, UN Assistant Secretary-General.

MATAR: You have travelled throughout Lebanon practically and Syria and the region to resolve this issue and still, one request by the Israelis, you have not been able to meet -- that is the fate of Captain Ron Arad. How much are the Israelis insisting on the condition of information about Arad since apparently, nobody seems to know anything about him nowadays. How much are the Israelis insisting on information about him before they go any further?

PICCO: Very, very much.

MATAR: To the extent that they might hold up the process and this becomes an obstacle?

PICCO: To the extent that for them, as they conveyed to us, this is a turning stone in the entire situation.

MATAR: And are you finding any creative ways of resolving the fate of Captain Arad?

PICCO: I hope so.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Picco, you mentioned the hostages who still have to be freed. There's also the question of the body of Alec Collett of the UN Secretariat -- a former colleague of ours who was a foreign correspondent of the Associated Press. Pictures of him being hanged were sent to the west. Is there any possibility, do you think, of finding his remains and having them turned over to his family?

PICCO: As you know, we are working for the return of the remains of more than just one person. We have good hope that the remains of another UN official who was kidnapped, Colonel Higgins, would shortly be returned. We have good hopes that the remains of others who were not UN officials would also shortly be returned. We have been working on the return of the remains of Mr. Collett, if indeed Mr. Collett is dead. I have to say that it is not an easy job for it seems to me that different people may know how to go about it in different cases so we may have more difficulty in getting some than others.

LITTLEJOHNS: In Collett's case, it was a different group from the others?

PICCO: It seems to me that, the two UN officials that were kidnapped, were not kidnapped by the same people and their remains are not in the hands of the same people.

LEWIS: Can you tell us anything about the role of Iran or some more about the role of Iran because it seems that the Iranians did play a very key role in all this and the Secretary-General went to Teheran in early September, saw President Rafsanjani and it was really after that we had quite a deluge of releases. So how did the Iranians help you? Did they put you in touch with the groups in Beirut and how did they put pressure on the groups to release

the hostages?

PICCO: I think the government of Iran has always said that they had influence over these groups, an influence which can be defined as, first and foremost, religious and perhaps, political also. And they used that influence to help the efforts of the Secretary-General. They also used that influence so that our contacts with these people could be facilitated or so that they could facilitate our making contacts with these people. But I never really had any doubt in my mind that the role of the groups in this case, was also very important.

MENON: In your dealings with these people -- you must have spoken to them at great length and not only about the negotiations but about their backgrounds, their beliefs and so on. Is it your sense that these are religious people who are involved in that?

PICCO: There was a reference some time ago in the newspaper to my own religion and I have to confess I found that reference a bit hurting because it went down into the privacy of my life and as I deeply respect privacy of people, I would like to respect theirs as well.

MENON: Which is to say, you don't want to comment on that?

PICCO: Correct.

MATAR: How would you comment on the reasons they have taken these hostages? Is it social, is it political? To what effect their motives have been connected to the situation in the Middle East? And what effect the solutions to these problems in the Middle East would help ease their problems?

PICCO: On the first part of your question, we did discuss this matter for some time and I believe their perception was that hostage-taking was not something they liked to do, but they had not been left with any other means. The objectives were definitely linked to the situation in the region and a last point, let me say that it is my hope that this entire episode would not be resolved in an episodic manner, if I may say so, but rather in a manner which would contribute to the de-confrontation of the entire region.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Picco, Thomas Sutherland, one of the released hostages, is reported to have made some remarks which were rather critical of Terry Waite, saying that Terry Waite had failed to develop an empathy with his captors. Some people call it the "Stockholm syndrome". Did you develop any kind of empathy with the people you were negotiating with -- the, for want of a better word, terrorists, who had taken these detainees?

PICCO: Well, as you know, I had several meetings with them and as I said, under unorthodox circumstances and they showed me a great concern about my well-being. They tried to be as courteous as they could be, they did their best to make those encounters as, how-can-I-say, relaxed as possible even if that may not be the appropriate word. I think whenever they conveyed to me a position, when we discussed it and when we reached a conclusion, they kept their word to me, both on the substance and on the timings. And I tried to keep my word to them which I think I did and that is what I can tell you.

LITTLEJOHNS: Did you get agreements in writing or was everything done orally?

PICCO: I think we had agreements which were of each.

LEWIS: Can you tell us something about the role of Syria in all this? We've talked about Iran, but not about Syria. I mean, the thing that has occurred to me is the Syrian army is in control of much of Lebanon so I wonder why the army didn't go and release the hostages. Or was it able in some way to play a role in introducing you to the hostage-takers?

PICCO: Well again, that is a question that should be answered by the Syrians themselves but the Syrians did help me a lot. As you know, I moved quite extensively in the region, I moved across borders, I moved not exactly in daylight and the help and co-operation of Syria was very important for many of these movements could not have taken place otherwise. With regard to the first part of your question, I think it is just too difficult to answer for me, as I do not know what logistically, if I may say so, could have been done or not done by the Syrian army. You may be in control of a particular area but it's a different matter to reach a particular small room and take out somebody without, in the meantime, putting him at risk to be perhaps harmed.

MENON: You referred earlier to the homework that was done before this whole operation had begun. To what extent did the homework involve briefings by the CIA and various other western agencies involved?

PICCO: The homework that I am referring to is the homework done with the governments of the region, exclusively, totally, and that is what the homework was all about. The contacts we had with the British authorities, the American authorities, the German authorities, were much more of a diplomatic nature, if you like, than anything else. My homework was done exclusively with the governments of the region.

MATAR: Back to the Israeli chapter -- again, there are I think, 7 Israeli soldiers in Lebanon. You might correct me on this. Among them -- Arad, but the bodies of the rest of them are not totally, necessarily in the hands of the groups that you negotiated with for the release of these hostages. Some of them are Palestinians, some of them probably with some other parties. Could you identify where they are and who you are dealing with on this specific issue?

PICCO: On the number that you referred to, let me just make a correction -- the number is now 6 not 7, for one body has been returned in the process of the last few months. Of the 6 people we are referring to, indeed nobody claims that they are in the hands of the same groups. That is a well-known fact, everybody accepts it, so the way of handling the various cases differs and we are handling it in a different way, case by case, I would say.

MATAR: Is there any Palestinian connection to that?

PICCO: I said that we were working in a different way with different people and I think it is more correct to leave it at that.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Picco, in the few seconds we have left, when did you actually start the process? How many years ago? When did you and Mr. Perez de Cuellar start doing your homework, as you put it?

PICCO: The homework started years ago. The real involvement of the Secretary-General I believe started when United Nations officials were kidnapped.

LITTLEJOHNS: And the breakthrough came when the Secretary-General was in Teheran in September?

PICCO: There were several breakthroughs and that was an important one.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Picco, that's all the time we have. Thank you for joining us on this edition of **WORLD CHRONICLE** and again, may we all congratulate you on a wonderful performance.

Our guest has been Giandomenico Picco, UN Assistant Secretary-General. He was interviewed here at United Nations Headquarters in New York by: Paul Lewis of The New York Times; Bhaskar Menon of PTI-TV of India and; Khalil Matar of Assharq Al-Awsat.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **WORLD CHRONICLE.**

****

Transcripts of the programme may be obtained free of charge by sending a stamped, self-addressed envelope to: **WORLD CHRONICLE,** United Nations, Room S-827, New York, N.Y. 10017, USA.

WORLD CHRONICLE is broadcast worldwide and features guests whose work is concerned with major global issues. This programme is a public affairs presentation of this station from United Nations Radio and Television.

Additional information material about the United Nations can be obtained by writing to the Public Inquiries Unit, United Nations, Room GA-57, New York, NY 10017, USA or the UN Information Centre in your country.